

REUTERS
10 FEBRUARY 1983

By Michael Posner

WASHINGTON

Barbie-America

A congressional investigation into Nazi war criminals in the United States may focus on whether American officials have lied and covered up information about them, a member of the investigation panel said today.

The case of Nazi Klaus Barbie -- the "Butcher of Lyons" -- has spurred several new congressional probes into charges that war criminals are living secret lives in the United States, and perhaps had been aided by U.S. intelligence agencies.

Similar charges have surfaced for over 30 years that perhaps thousands of the some 600,000 refugees admitted here soon after World War II were either Nazis or acted as Nazi agents in killing Jews and other groups.

The expulsion of Barbie from Bolivia to Lyons, France, this weekend has raised new allegations that U.S. intelligence agents recruited Nazi war criminals to get information about the Soviet Union or other Nazis in return for help in escaping prosecution.

A French lawyer and an American professor have alleged U.S. intelligence agents helped Barbie flee after he was taken into American custody at the end of the war in Europe.

The House Judiciary Committee's subcommittee on immigration, refugees and international law plans to conduct one of the major new probes into Nazi war criminals in the United States.

Public hearings are expected either this spring or summer.

One of its investigators, congressman Barney Frank, a Massachusetts Democrat, told Reuters today the group believes officials "lied" during an earlier investigation in the late 1970s by denying knowledge of several alleged Nazi war criminals.

Other investigations are being prepared by the House and Senate intelligence committees, but the details of those hearings may not become public.

If the past repeats itself, however, the congressional investigators may not get very far.

During the immigration subcommittee's investigation, congressmen were told by officials of the respected general accounting office, the government watchdog and investigating arm of congress, that they ran into one roadblock after another in seeking information.

They told of red tape, bureaucratic delays and stonewalling.

In the new round of investigations, the intelligence committees are expected to pursue leads that U.S. intelligence operatives may have helped Barbie flee to Bolivia where he lived under the assumed name of Klaus Altmann.

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